

# **It's A Letter**

**Scripture: Revelation 1:4-11**

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People of God: There are many different ways of describing and explaining the Book of Revelation. But one of the most overlooked descriptions is the fact that this book is a letter. Not your typical letter, but nonetheless, a letter. A letter written by someone, for someone, using some of the basic elements of letter writing used in those days.

This form of a letter gives us some insight into understanding this book. Think of some of the letters you have received over the years. I have a box of letters, mostly from my college days (when email didn't exist). If it's a letter from my mother, it'll be just a short note—usually a postcard, since writing English was a challenge for her. If it's from Elaine, there will be a funny story in it. If it's from Tony, the writing will be chicken scratches. And if the letter is more square and ornate, it'll be a wedding invitation, as my friends got married. Even without reading a letter, there is much you can learn just from knowing who wrote and to whom.

That's also the case here. In our passage for this evening, we encounter the typical opening components of a letter. We are told who wrote it, to whom it is written, and some words of greeting. This standard way of beginning a letter in the ancient world provides some insight into the meaning of all what follows. It can serve as a safeguard on some wild interpretations and predictions. This is a first-century letter.

Unlike letters today, where we sign our names at the end, in the ancient world it was customary to begin your letter with your name. That's what we have here. The author simply identifies himself as John.

This simple identification has left subsequent commentators frustrated. Which John? The name appears four times in this book, but with

little further identification. Is it John the Apostle, one of the sons of Zebedee? Is it the same John, who wrote the Gospel of John, as well as the letters of John? The arguments go back and forth.

But the fact that John merely has to mention simply his name would mean that he was well known by those to whom he is writing. And he clearly knows his audience, knowing the seven churches inside and out. As well, Patmos was just 50 miles southwest of Ephesus, where John the Apostle was known to have served—all this indicates that the author is John, the disciple of Jesus.

But more important than whether this John was John the Apostle is the description in verse 9. This is the author's self-description: "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." John sees a unity with fellow believers. There is no hierarchy of importance in the church. Pastors, apostles, or any other church leader are merely brothers in Christ. We are companions together in our walk with God. Together we share in Christ, the blessings and the struggles of what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

What is that John shares with fellow-believers? Look at verse 9, where we see three things: Suffering, kingdom and patient endurance. Three terms that appear throughout this book.

Suffering. Literally, it means "tribulation." The tribulation of the church started already in the days of John. Jesus warned his followers that trouble would come to us. In the Gospel of John (16:33), Jesus says: "In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart I have overcome the world." The word "trouble" is the same as used here: suffering, tribulation. This is what we can experience in our world because of our faith.

But thankfully, we also share in the kingdom of God. This isn't merely a future hope. This is a present reality. We are part of the kingdom of God that will make all things new. We're part of a way of living and doing things that goes contrary to the way the world lives and does things. We are kingdom people, sharing in the kingship of Jesus Christ.

Because of that we can have patient endurance. Though believers suffer tribulation because of their faith, because they are part of this victorious kingdom, they can patiently endure this period of time, when the kingdom of God, with all of its blessings, has not yet been fully realized. We are in a time waiting. At times, painfully waiting. But a waiting that is not in vain.

Notice that I have applied these three terms to us, here today. The church, throughout the ages, has shared these things, though the suffering of some are more intense and real than for others. But there is a solidarity

among believers. When one suffers, we all suffer. And today, there are parts of the church experiencing tribulation. For example, the Ottawa Citizen this week reported on how churches in Malaysia have been firebombed, because of how Christians used the name “Allah.” Together, we are fellow companions in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.

Now these terms first of all applied to those to whom John was writing. John identifies them in verse 4, as the seven churches in the province of Asia. These are then listed in verse 11 and in chapter 2 and 3, we get an inside look into their spiritual condition.

Why these churches? There were other churches, even in the province of Asia. The church in Colosse comes to mind. Why these churches?

As a stamp collector, I like the suggestion that it’s because they were postal centers. They were all along a circular road that began and ended in Ephesus, with about 30 to 50 miles between them. Each was a distribution center for the Roman postal system and other administrative matters. It makes sense to use that system to distribute this letter.

Regardless, these seven churches were real, historic churches. They do not represent seven periods of church history, as a few have argued. They were real congregations, whose strengths and weaknesses we will discover when we get to chapters two and three.

After identifying yourself and your recipients, it was customary to say a word of greeting. John does that, but as with all the NT letters, these words of greetings are far from ordinary. This wasn’t your typical, “Hi, how are you” greeting that we tend to give. Instead, John’s words of greeting were loaded with meaning.

“Grace and peace to you.” John, like the other NT writers, adapts some typical words of greeting into a profound, deeply re-assuring message. Grace and peace to you. Grace: the undeserved favor of God upon sinful humanity. As a result of that grace we have peace. A state of well being that is not dependent on outward circumstances, but upon the finished work of Christ. Grace and peace to you.

John offers these words of greeting, not merely on his own behalf; he offers these words of greeting on behalf of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But as so typical in this book, it’s not as simply put as that.

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was and who is to come. John is here paraphrasing the name of God from Exodus 3:14, which God revealed to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”. It’s also a way of underscoring that God transcends time, that God oversees time, that God is the same in the past, present and future. The God who has already acted to save fallen

humanity in Jesus Christ is the same God who will come to bring that plan of redemption to completion.

Grace and peace to you from the seven spirits before his throne. Given the context and structure of these verses, we are expecting a reference to the Spirit, but not to seven spirits. That raises the question: How can there be seven spirit—isn't there only one Holy Spirit? The NIV's alternative translation of "sevenfold Spirit" seems to solve the problem, but the fact is that spirits is plural in the Greek.

What we need to understand is that John is not giving a formal name for the Spirit, but a symbolic description. Using imagery that is rooted in Zechariah, as well as Isaiah 11:2—"The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—seven references to the Spirit—it is a way of emphasizing the fullness and richness of the Spirit. It's a way of stressing the completion and perfection of the Spirit in the life of the church and the believer.

Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ. Again John isn't content to leave it at that. He gives a three-fold description of Jesus Christ: the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Faithful witness—Jesus came to testify to the truth about God and what he is doing in the world. The Greek word for witness is martyr, someone who dies for the sake of his cause. Jesus was the faithful witness/martyr—a model to the early believers, who were now being called to be faithful witness—even to the point of death.

Firstborn of the dead—Jesus who died, also rose from the dead. His resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of his followers. And so if the faithful witness of the early believers were to result in their death, they are reminded that they will be resurrected. Death will not have the last word, because Christ has conquered death.

Ruler of the kings of the earth—Jesus not only arose from the dead, he ascended into heaven to reign at God's right hand. This is not a future hope, this is a present reality. Jesus ascended to reign. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth, even if those kings do not acknowledge it, even if those kings or rulers persecute believers. Jesus is the Supreme Ruler.

Through his death, resurrection and ascension—Christ has guaranteed the victory. This is what can reassure believers, in any time in any place. And so today, we hear these words of greeting being addressed to us. In every worship service, we hear God's greeting in one form or another—including these words. They speak to you.

From the God who is faithful throughout time, from the fullness of the Spirit, through the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, grace—this undeserved favor—and peace—this state of well-being come to you.

No wonder the response to this greeting is a doxology. That's what the second half of verse 5 and 6 is: a doxology—a word of praise—to him be glory and power for ever and ever!

But even in these words of praise, we are given even further reason to come in worship of our Savior.

To him who loves us. Do we have to explain that word “love”? It's not to be so much explained, as to be received, embraced, and relished. He loves us. To him be glory and power for ever and ever!

To him who freed us from our sins by his blood. What a powerful image of our salvation. We have been freed from our captivity from our sins. We were slaves to sin. But Christ purchased us by his blood so that we have been set free from our bondage to sin. To him be glory and power for ever and ever.

To him who has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father. Here we have an echo to Exodus 19, where God says of his people, “although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The church is the inheritor of these promises. We have become a kingdom, sharing in the kingly reign of Jesus. We have become priests, having direct access to our heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus. To him be glory and power for ever and ever.

To him who has equipped us then to serve his God and Father. All these blessings are for a purpose. It's to serve our God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It isn't to serve our own self-interest, but to serve our God. That which was once impossible because of our sin and disobedience is now possible through the work of Jesus. To him be glory and power for ever and ever.

And so, these words of Revelation lead us to worship. That will happen time and time again. The basic opening of a letter, with its expected mention of an author, recipient and words of greeting, becomes an invitation to worship. To him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen and Amen!